

# COSMOPOLITAN MAN AND THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY: AN INTERPRETATION OF *OTHELLO*

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In the world of today the existence of a common humanity has been established, negatively at least, by a common fear of a common extinction. Only rational beings fear thermonuclear annihilation; only rational beings can create such means of annihilation. An unprecedented danger supplies a new kind of evidence for the oldest thesis in political philosophy: man is by nature a rational and political animal. The roots of man's humanity, as of his inhumanity, are in the political community, and in the political community's capacity for making war or peace. As the growth from the roots reaches what were once the heavens, the problem of reconciling the origins with the ends attains an acute proportion. Can the new awareness of the commonness of our common humanity cause the fashioning of institutions and men equal to the problem that that very humanity has created? Can the particularity that characterizes individual races, nations, creeds—the particularity that has, from the known origins of political life until the present, provided the substance of political life both in its misery and in its glory—can that particularity transform itself into universality, as the finest and ultimate fruit of human reason? Or may the consummation of rationality, as it is given us to know it, be found in its own self-extinction?

In pondering these ever new questions we turn again to the oldest wisdom of our kind. We have too long neglected the understanding of Shakespeare, perhaps because the brilliance of his art has blinded us to his political genius. Shakespeare lived through a decisive period in the emergence of modern society and thought; and he presented in living *tableaux* the human problems created by the new world opening before him. That he does not offer solutions nor formulas does not justify ignoring him. Before political scientists can proceed to the suggestion of policies, they must perceive the problems in the fullness of their complexity. In Shakespeare's works is to be found as complete a range of human types as any man is likely to meet in his lifetime, and they are viewed with an eye that penetrates more deeply than that of any common observer. The art of the poet brings to consciousness psychological depths that have not been fathomed by any other method.

Shakespeare's explicit treatment of the possibility of an interracial, interfaith society is given its most detailed development in his two Venetian plays, two plays which may well be thought the profoundest recorded analysis of the relation of Jew and Christian, of white man and black man. Whether Shakespeare's apparent pessimism is the final word on this subject we need not here pronounce. Certainly no further apology is needed to introduce an attempt to comprehend, in human and political terms, the grounds for that pessimism.\*

\* For a similar attempt see H. V. Jaffa, "The Limits of Politics: An Interpretation of *King Lear*, Act I, Scene i," this REVIEW, June, 1957, pp. 405-427.

## I

The Earl of Shaftesbury, in the most penetrating criticism of *Othello* that I have read,<sup>1</sup> asserts that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona is a mismatch, a monstrous union founded on the lying pretensions of a charlatan and the unhealthy imagination of a misguided young girl. For him the tragedy is not the consequence of Iago's vile machinations but the natural fruit of seeds that are sown in the characters of the heroes and in their relationship. The simple, citizen's moral of the story is, according to Shaftesbury, that such marriages between foreigners who have nothing in common other than their desire for novelty are to be avoided and condemned. Only the sick taste of one not satisfied at home could have led Desdemona to her choice; only a moral education that did not move the phantasy and the sympathy of the girl could account for her blind search for the incredible and the exotic. And Shaftesbury, echoing the moral taste of the pre-romantic critics, sees the *dénouement* as the just punishment of faulty beings. However narrow this understanding of the play may be, it raises in a clear and honest fashion the fundamental question: what is the character of the relationship between Desdemona and Othello? The interpretation of *Othello* has tended to neglect the question and has concentrated on the psychological development of the jealousy. But this jealousy has no meaning except in relation to the kind of man who suffers it and the reasons why he is particularly susceptible to it. We are presented with the picture of a couple who have married in an unusual way but who are nonetheless very much in love and who are led to disaster through the external actions of a hostile world. We are asked to believe that a paragon of strength and confidence is transformed into a furious beast driven by suspicion only because he has been tempted by a devil. It is not enough to say that such is the nature of jealousy: we can easily imagine many men, exposed to the same temptations, who would never have succumbed to them. Even the most superficial reader is struck by the slightness of the proofs which convince Othello of Desdemona's infidelity. Is not Othello ripe for the doubt which comes to afflict him? Are we to believe that the jealousy which erupts so unexpectedly is not the fruit of a soil long prepared and cultivated, albeit unconsciously? Does not Shakespeare always incorporate in the life of each of his tragic heroes precisely those elements which make him the aptest vehicle for the emergence of that phenomenon which he, above all others, exhibits?

The latter alternative is clearly the correct one; for it alone is in conformity with what we know of Shakespeare's genius and of the nature of tragedy in general. In other Shakespearian tragedies, disaster develops directly from the character of the tragic hero and, even more, out of precisely those features of it that constitute his greatness. Macbeth's pride and ambition, which raise him above other men in daring and vision, are the direct cause of his murder of Duncan and his entry upon a tyrant's career. Macbeth's crimes are consequences of Macbeth's greatness of soul, and the enormous impact of the play

<sup>1</sup> *Characteristicks* (London, 1727), Vol. 1, pp. 347-350.

comes from the impression of overpowering force conveyed by the hero, joined to our sense of the inevitability of his destiny. Or, consider Hamlet's responsibility for the deaths of all those he loved and the failure of his attempt to do justice. Is it not bound up with those traits that cause us to admire him—his conscience and his admirable sensitivity to his fellows? If this were not the case we should either regard these men simply as criminals, or as beings who may deserve our pity; but they would certainly not move our deepest emotions, nor call forth our respect. As it is, we see them as examples of human greatness; they move in areas of experience from which ordinary mortals are cut off. But this very superiority in human quality seems to lead to crime and disaster. It is this combination that constitutes the unique quality of tragedy. What virtues, then, make Othello's jealousy necessary and in some measure excuse it? Why must the great general with the sovereign self-control murder his innocent wife? Because Iago told him she was unfaithful? This is to degrade the work to the level of psychological "realism," a realism which contents itself with the analysis of passions, no matter by whom they are felt nor to what end. It is to deny that Shakespeare regarded his heroes' emotions as truly interesting only insofar as the one who experiences them is worthy of attention and his objects serious. In this perspective Othello appears a weak fool and Desdemona's death a senseless slaughter that can evoke only horror and disgust. Tragedy is founded on the notion that in the decisive respect human beings are free and responsible, that their fates are the consequences of their choices. All that is a result of external force or chance is dehumanizing in the tragic view. But *Othello* so interpreted is only the story of an easily inflamed man who has the unfortunate accident of meeting an Iago. This does not do justice to the sentiment we have in seeing the play and it is the task of interpretation to render articulate what is only felt, and to elaborate the larger significance of the characters and the action. Such an analysis requires more attention to the political setting of the drama than has been the habit since the beginning of romantic criticism in the nineteenth century.

## II

To this end we must go back behind the jealousy to the strange love that united Othello and Desdemona. It is in their love that the seeds of the ultimate disaster are sown; and it is not an easy union to analyze, this marriage between an old, black, foreign warrior and a young, beautiful, innocent Venetian noblewoman. In fact, the first act is devoted almost exclusively to a development of the character of the marriage and its ambiguity. The suggestions as to the source of the union include lust, profit and the purest admiration for virtue. In a sense the entire play is motivated by the beliefs of the actors about the nature of the love and it is these beliefs much more than any acts that are the moving causes of the tragedy. Indeed, one of the unique characteristics of *Othello* is that the final action of the play is so little the result of previous actions, and so much the consequence of changes in opinion wrought in the characters during the play. And perhaps the best way to see what these opinions are is through

the activities of Iago. Iago is a villain, no doubt; but his villainy is not shallow; he has a clear grasp of what is most important to everyone (with the possible exception of Emilia), and he acts on all the persons only through their own opinions. In each case, the individual can be justly regarded as responsible for his own troubles; Iago only precipitates something that was already there. He works like a confidence man; only the quality intrinsic to the one he tempts enables him to succeed.<sup>2</sup> He is a faithful mirror of all around him; he adapts himself to those with whom he speaks. In a sense, we would not know the other characters in the play without Iago. We would see them only as they appear in ordinary life, without penetrating the masks that conceal their real natures. Iago alone lets us know from the outset those weaknesses in others that would otherwise stand unrevealed until the crises of their lives. Iago shows the hidden necessity in men, the things they care about most; he has a diabolic insight. He offers men what they hope for or are afraid of and, in so doing, he causes their characters to undergo the extreme test. For example, it is possible that Roderigo might have forgotten Desdemona and married someone else. But in appealing to Roderigo's defeated suit, in offering him hope, Iago makes him display his petty and absurd nature, full of spite and envy, capable of extreme folly and crime in a spirit of innocent stupidity. Roderigo is such a fool as thinks he can buy the favors of a queen. Iago is only the catalyst of Roderigo's folly. If Roderigo had not come to ruin, his salvation would have been sheer accident. Now, Iago proposes as his supreme task to encompass the downfall of Othello; and it is through Iago's actions and speech that we can see his catalytic agency upon Othello, and thereby see the necessity which shapes the tragic end.

The play begins in an atmosphere of conspiracy, and our first acquaintance with Othello is through the eyes of an enemy. The beginning is a sort of foretaste of Iago's skill, showing him expertly manipulating Roderigo. Iago is arranging the disclosure of the marriage to Brabantio; he wishes to present it in such a way that "though that his joy be joy,"<sup>3</sup> the union will appear to be an abomination. In the midst of a horrendous hue and cry, the love affair is made known to Brabantio as a species of robbery motivated by lust. The father of Desdemona is presented with the most obscene picture of his daughter's relations with Othello. Any chance that Brabantio might accept the marriage is destroyed by his first view of it. His mind is automatically closed to the possibility that it may be a special and fine sort of relationship. Of course, like all Iago's victims, he is predisposed towards the insinuated interpretation. He is a good Venetian, a solid man of importance and property.<sup>4</sup> For him, the best is at home, is Venetian. There is law and order in Venice and the Venetian ways

<sup>2</sup> For this reason Iago is never able to work directly on Desdemona: if she has vices they are not of the self-interested variety. He has no way of acting on her, no lever with which to move her. Iago can only influence those around Desdemona and hence accomplish her disaster.

<sup>3</sup> Act I, Scene i, 78. All references are to the Furness *Variorum* edition of *Othello* (Philadelphia, 1886).

<sup>4</sup> I, i, 118, cf. 86-88; I, ii, 13-19.

are *the* standard of conduct. Any other way, anything foreign, may be tolerated, or even admired, but can never be fully equal. He is a model of good citizenship and, as does any father, he expects to find in his wonderful daughter what he believes is best in himself. His daughter is his fullest reality. Hence her defection from Venetian standards is a reflection on him and on Venice. He can only regard it as the effect of magic: she is his daughter, so there must be something wrong with her or with him, alternatives both of which are repugnant. Therefore the cause must be something supernatural. Brabantio is not a man particularly inclined to superstition; all to the contrary. He is a very sober and reasonable man. His reasonableness is that of a good bourgeois who cannot see much that goes beyond the local and the evident; to admit the possibility that there are important dimensions beyond these would destroy the very reasonableness which enables him to operate so effectively within his own little world. He refers to drugs, where his modern counterpart might lay the blame on "foreign philosophies." His speech to Othello is a masterpiece of common sense, revealing the virtues and defects of that faculty. He refers himself again and again to things of sense, to what is palpable.<sup>5</sup> He cannot conceive of a relationship based on spiritual communion alone, devoid of the ordinary attractions; or, to put it more favorably for him, he cannot imagine that a match of such alien beings could be purely spiritual. It is, as he says, a relation that braves nature, years, country, credit, everything.<sup>6</sup> He poses the question very clearly: what can possibly be the basis of their love?

We are thus presented with two explicit choices and one that is implied: either the marriage is caused by brutal lust, occult practices, or—as the spectator might infer—something beautiful and fine not common to the commerce of the species. Every dramatic device has been employed by Shakespeare to give expression to the opposition between Othello and Desdemona and the shocking character of their marriage. To an Elizabethan audience the extraordinary nature of this relationship was doubly clear. For, although racial prejudice did not exist in the modern sense, nor as it does in America with its special political history, there was perhaps a livelier sense of the differences among nations, races and religions. The world was larger and less uniform, and there were still fundamental differences in belief, taste, and desire from people to people. There was less contact between the various nations and a strong sense of the barbarism of those who lay beyond one's own borders—a sense kept alive by the occasional presence of certain types of foreigners. Moreover, there was no liberal ideology which constrained intelligent citizens to suppress or alter their first feelings towards foreigners or those of another color in favor of an attitude based upon reflection or abstract conviction rather than emotion. And there were no compelling political reasons for the attempt to eradicate distinctions between races, creeds, and nations. Hence Othello's exotic qualities were sharpened for the audience for which the play was intended. Shakespeare

<sup>5</sup> I, ii, 78–98; cf. I, iii, 75–79.

<sup>6</sup> I, iii, 115–117; cf. II, i, 229–31; III, iii, 259–263.

chose the most visible and striking means to arouse the sentiments of the spectators: Othello's blackness.<sup>7</sup>

Othello's color not only provides a visual contrast but is meant to horrify the viewer. Whether Shakespeare personally felt that this was only an English prejudice is not here at issue. What is clear is that Othello is physically repulsive to the other figures in the play and that "black Othello" set next to "fair Desdemona" is meant to arouse those who see it. It is not that there would be any racist principle against their being married, or that Othello would be regarded as an inferior being because he is not white; it is rather that he would not be considered a normal or appropriate choice for a young beauty's romantic interest. Iago knows that it is the common opinion that Othello is ugly, and the working of his poison depends decisively upon his manipulation of this opinion. It is the necessary condition of Roderigo's foolish belief that Desdemona will grant his suit, of Othello's stinging doubts about his own attractiveness, of Brabantio's assumption that there has been an ugly seduction. Brabantio bases his whole appeal to the Duke upon the evident incredibility of Desdemona's being aroused physically by "a thing such as" Othello.<sup>8</sup> In the theatre, where the imagination is limited by the physical presence of the characters, there is a tendency, as in painting, to infer the moral worth of persons from the way they look; in such circumstances Othello's blackness must have an overwhelming effect and be a predisposing factor difficult to overcome. In *Titus Andronicus* the relation of Aaron the Moor with Tamara, queen of the Goths, is meant to strike one immediately as foul and appropriate only to barbarians. And Portia's reaction to the "complexion" of the Prince of the Moors certainly expressed what all Elizabethans felt. She is painted as having healthy tastes and with her Moorish suitor she was running the risk of being permanently coupled to something very unattractive.

The color difference is not all that is meant to move the audience to grave reservations about Othello. There is the fact that he is a Moor. The Moors were popularly considered barbarous, heathens naturally at war with Christians and Europeans. They were understood to be dangerous and unaware of the limitations set by civilized man. The villainous Aaron proves that this way of looking at Moors was not totally unknown to Shakespeare; he could present this scoundrel as plausible without the preparation that is necessary to convince us that Othello is noble. And the other Moor in Shakespeare, the Prince in the *Merchant of Venice*, is treated as a comic and absurd figure. He has many traits

<sup>7</sup> Cf. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 198-203 (London, 1929). In addition to Bradley's excellent reasonings it may be mentioned that Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* is black and that the Prince of Morocco in the *Merchant of Venice* is apparently so (II, i, 1-16; II, vii, 81). In *Othello* there are these references to his color: I, i, 72, 96-97, 116 (Barbary horses were black); ii, 87-88, iii, 320-321; II, ii, 48; III, iii, 308. Black clearly does not mean Moorish as we understand it, but simply black. Shakespeare had a definite dramatic purpose in making Othello as black as possible and could rely on the convention of the theatre and the inexperience of the audience to permit this alteration of reality.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. I, i, 105-153; I, ii, 78-98; I, iii, 75-79; II, i, 254-270.

in common with Othello, especially his warlike nature and talk of his adventures; he is presented somewhat as Iago would like to present Othello.<sup>9</sup> In sophisticated European circles he appears ridiculous and "stuffed with epithets of war." To the untutored English audience, the Moor was a stranger bringing from his dark continent mysteries, dangers, and a new religion. Shakespeare in making a Moor his hero runs counter to an established pattern of thought. He must make special efforts to convince us of Othello's nobility and superior humanity. But in so doing he does not intend enlightenment, as Lessing does in "Nathan the Wise." For Shakespeare's Moor, after making all the detours of civilized man and manifesting an unexpected depth, returns at the end to the barbarism that the audience originally expected. The first, primitive prejudice against Othello seems to find justification in the conclusion.

In addition to the two major considerations which make the match so unsuitable, color and nation, there are age, wealth, and social station.<sup>10</sup> We should bear in mind the fact that marriage had a somewhat different status for the Elizabethans than for us in our day. As heirs of the romantic tradition, we believe that love is enough to justify all, and our sympathies go out to it. But formerly marriages were arranged. Fathers were thought apt to have a more balanced view of what a lifetime's living together would require than their inexperienced children in their passing fancies. The responsibilities of family and the continuance of great traditions had to be taken into consideration. The marriage of Othello and Desdemona neglected all of these things in violating the wishes of Brabantio. What predisposes us immediately in favor of Othello—that he is beloved of Desdemona despite his alien birth and color—must have given pause to Shakespeare's audience. If this is not taken into consideration, Othello seems the victim of merciless persecution and his greatness and weakness are lost to our eyes. It is against this background that Shakespeare tells his story.

Indeed the absence of the ordinary external accompaniments of marriage suggests that this is a marriage of true love. It differs from conventional marriages, supported by money, beauty, similarity of position and education. A love purified of all accidental and physical elements would certainly be a great human achievement, a transcendence of mundane attachments. It would be a love of the true rather than of the familiar. But can marriage exist in such a rarefied atmosphere? Once marriage is purged of conventional dross, what really remains? What is the cause of the love of Othello and Desdemona? It is

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Merchant of Venice*, II, ii and vii; *Othello*, I, i, 16–18; II, i, 255–256. The Prince of Morocco speaks of war and his own heroism; he has a high-flown and dramatic manner of speech different from that of the other characters; he speaks of his high birth and uses it as a justification for his suit; and he too seems sincerely attached to the beautiful Venetian.

<sup>10</sup> The fact that Othello mentions his own high lineage (I, ii, 22–27) can well mean that he feels he must do so. He protests the fact. It is probable that his royal birth was not recognized at Venice and, if it was, nevertheless was not considered to constitute equality with Venetian nobility. Even if Othello is himself really persuaded that he comes from stock as good as that into which he has married, Brabantio does not accept it as such.

certain Othello gave her no drugs and that Iago's lascivious description of their romance is false, designed to shock refined sentiment. Othello may well be entirely past the stage of caring for physical pleasures ("the young affects in me defunct"—"to be free and bounteous to her mind")<sup>11</sup> and if the marriage ever reached consummation, it was not before Cyprus. Not even Desdemona regards Othello as physically desirable.<sup>12</sup> Putting aside for a moment the notion that she was just a silly inexperienced child and Othello a fortune hunter,<sup>13</sup> their relation would appear to be an example of what has come to be known as a platonic love, a love not lacking in passion, rather one of the most intense passion, but completely beyond physical need, based on mutual admiration. This raises the question of what precisely was admired by each.

Brabantio assumed that Venice would come to the aid of Venice outraged, in the shape of his daughter. But as Iago knew very well, *raison d'état* made Othello necessary and would overrule any claim made against him.<sup>14</sup> Now, who is this Othello who is so important to Venice that he can stand against the attacks of its most powerful and respected citizens, so eminent that he eclipses Brabantio himself—to the point that the Duke no longer notices the Senator when they enter together? Othello is the protector of Venice, a foreigner brought in to ward off the attacks of other foreigners, the Turks. The Turks are men of another religion; so was Othello, but he is a convert to Christianity and is most loyal to it; it provides much of his fervor for the cause of Venice. And as he is first represented to us, he appears well worthy of his reputation and of the trust reposed in him. He seems a man of simple decency who imposes on others by his quiet strength and evident competence. He is most impressive in his confidence in himself, an apparent sureness of his worth that nothing can shake. He bears up under abuse with a dignity that makes his attackers seem mean and small and gives the immediate impression that the right is on his side. He maintains all proportions, a respect for Brabantio's age and worth, while never losing the dignity of his conviction that he himself is just, a conviction so surely held that it needs no protest. He is sure that his real services are appreciated by the city and that he is esteemed. Moreover, his ancestry is royal, and he is hence of a dignity equal to that of any Venetian. He is apparently not the uprooted foreigner unsure of his status in the world. In a word, he is self-sufficient, according to his own belief. The most amazing fact of the play is that from this acme of assurance emerges the nadir of suspicion. There is an almost unbelievable transformation, and it is Shakespeare's analysis of this development that contains the deepest meaning of the play.

<sup>11</sup> I, iii, 290–293; cf. Furness' excellent note, pp. 75–76; III, iii, 309–310.

<sup>12</sup> Desdemona's "I saw Othello's visage in his mind," I, iii, 280; cf. note 8.

<sup>13</sup> This is a possibility hinted at by both Iago and the Duke, and somewhat supported by Othello's judicious choice of the moment of marriage, when he was most needed: I, ii, 60–61, iii, 195, 252–254 ff.; cf. I, i, 162–168. Both charges, that Othello used drugs and that he was a fortune hunter, are in some measure justified by the event, although not in the vulgar way intended by their authors. He did bewitch Desdemona by his stories more powerful than any drug; and he was seeking a place in the world.

<sup>14</sup> I, i, 162–168.

And how then did the love affair come to pass? Surprisingly enough, not through the deeds of Othello but through his speeches. Although he protests himself to be only a man of action and lacking in eloquence, his influence over Desdemona has its source in the terrible tales of his past. Othello represents himself as a poor speaker and one who depreciates mere words. But he seems to influence others almost entirely through his speeches. He is impressive for what he is supposed to have done, but his own testimony is the only real source for our belief in those great actions. He gives witness to his own might and is believed.<sup>15</sup> In his great speech recounting the course of his wooing, he makes it seem that it was the gentle Desdemona who made the advances and that he was the wooed. Desdemona admired him for his incredible deeds and his great sufferings. He loved her because she pitied him; he loved her for her love of him, which is a sort of confirmation of his own worth. He is lovable for his sufferings, and pity is the source of her love. This presentation of the love affair is in harmony with Othello's self-sufficiency. He is admirable and needs little beyond himself. Desdemona is the crowning acquisition of a virtuous life. The relationship is a sound one because Othello is a man in possession of himself, of notable quality, and Desdemona cares for someone both solid and noble.

### III

The course of the play, however, makes clear that Othello is not so firmly established as he may appear to be or as he believes himself to be. To understand why, we must reflect for a moment on the character of the political community, as it naturally is, always and everywhere. Civil society is a closed corporation; those who live in it have certain bonds that they do not share with those whom they call foreigners. The situation is similar to that of the family, and in fact the political community is often understood to be a sort of family. It may be a mere accident that a man is born in one place rather than another. But that accident may be decisive in forming him. Men of one nation have often seemed to men of another nation virtually to be animals of a different species. Each city has its manners and its gods; the very life of the city depends upon this particularism: to live, it must defend its ancestral way, which is a combination of human accidents and special institutions adapted to the here and now. Good citizenship implies a devotion to those ways; and a universality, a cosmopolitanism that devoted itself to the essence of man as he is eternally would destroy those roots of affection which are necessary to political life. Practical life requires adaptations to particular and imperfect circumstances

<sup>15</sup> This is precisely what Shaftesbury objects to. He sees Othello as a talker and not a doer. He impresses Desdemona with lies (*cf.* *Iago*, II, i, 255-257) and touches her naive phantasy. Such stories are a great danger, and even the Bible because of its strangeness is not, according to Shaftesbury, a suitable source for the stories of poets. The proper subjects with which to impress the young are those that are probable and within the compass of reason. Only pretenders who wish to overwhelm and cause suspension of the critical faculties behave as does Othello. Shaftesbury apparently believes that such stories as those of "men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders" were evident falsehoods and meant to be understood as such by Shakespeare.

and emphasizes considerations which are theoretically indifferent. To live as men, acting men, humankind must be divided, the distinction between friend and stranger must come into being; and men must care more for their fellow citizens and their city than they do for all others. Just as no one can become truly a member of a family into which he was not born, no one can set his roots deeply in a city that is not his own. In a sense, the brotherhood of man does not extend beyond the walls of the city; or, there are two brotherhoods of man, one as men are universally and the other as men are in their practical lives; and the two are incommensurable. A man can be fully at home only in his own city. His style of life and his goals are provided by it; from it he gets his sense of belonging and his knowledge of what he is in the world. Most, if not all, men know themselves from their place in the city; their notions of what is right and wrong and what is respectable are part of this whole. A being who was completely indifferent to such a world, who had no need of any particular place, would either be a beast living on unconscious passion or a super-man, a sort of deity, who could receive his laws and his aspirations from the silent vastness of the universe.<sup>16</sup>

Othello seems to feel at home in Venice; but how could this foreigner, who is also black, arrive at such a station? There seem to be several immediate possibilities. We can set aside the alternative that he did not care about the opinion of others. He insists on respect; his very killing of Desdemona, he says, he did for his honor. He feels it necessary to point out that his background is as good as that of any Venetian.<sup>17</sup> He is a proud man, and pride does not brook contempt. The truly proud man considers himself superior to others because he is above the petty concerns of private interest and can devote himself to the common good; his rewards are in the glory he reaps from other men. Reputation is the stuff of his being. Othello believes that he deserves admiration and

<sup>16</sup> That a city is not something that one can just choose is clearly Shakespeare's view; one need only consider the political settings of the various plays and especially those of the historical works. There are different national characters and the kind of action which is typical varies from place to place: the plays situated in ancient Rome are certainly very different in men and interest from those that take place in modern Venice or Verona. Long tradition, stock, climate, and laws change everything. There are very few plays of Shakespeare which could be imagined as taking the same course in another locale. *Titus Andronicus* is in a way a comedy concerning a man born out of his time, if not place; and much of the often remarked absurdity of the piece comes from the fact of Titus Andronicus's attempt to act like an old Roman gentleman among oriental barbarians. Not many heroes in Shakespeare could easily be transferred in time or place and still retain the decisive aspects of their characters, or still deal with the same problems; Prospero is perhaps one. But simple cosmopolitanism from a Shakespearean standpoint would rob men of all that is interesting in them, bringing about a unity at the lowest common denominator. Dramatically speaking, at least, most great men are great because they are devoted to the highest goals of a particular political entity which has chosen, willfully or no, to develop one aspect of the human possibility at the sacrifice of others; old Romans cannot live as modern Danes do; and, if one attempted to combine the two, the deepest features of both would be lost. And to participate in a particular political community depends upon birth and education, upon accidents.

<sup>17</sup> This to prove that he should be treated well by Venetians. Cf. note 10.

that he has it, that Venice is truly grateful to him for his services.<sup>18</sup> His virtue outweighs the accident of his birth. Othello believes that he is universally valued and valuable, that he can go any place and be accepted; the walls of the city are not really boundaries to virtue. At the same time, he can only see himself in the opinions of the men about him; this is the contradiction in his situation—he is independent of particular national ways of life but he draws his being, like any citizen, from the honors accorded by the cities, honors which differ from city to city and which are generally reserved for citizens. Is it really possible to transcend the city on the level of the life of action lived in it, and become universal? Can a man who has no “natural” home be a statesman?<sup>19</sup>

Othello's problem is best illustrated by the fact that he is a mercenary. Now mercenaries are traditionally regarded as a low form of humanity. They sell their courage to the highest bidder; what is noble in a citizen becomes in them a form of baseness. The citizen risks his being for the sake of the laws; the laws lend him their dignity and he is exalted in his devotion to something beyond his own life. A mercenary is indifferent to the very thing which gives meaning to the citizen's soldiering; he does not truly care for what he is defending. The glory that attaches to heroism is not given to those who are better able to kill men than others; to be above the animal or the perverse, the death of men must be understood as the sacrifice of life in the name of some cause greater than life. Even if a mercenary desired to fight nobly, he could not; for he cannot care as the citizen cares for what is his own. Nor is it in the nature of men to serve freely those who will not honor them. Hence it is that mercenaries are degraded men who make a travesty of the highest acts of citizenship.

But Othello is not such an insensitive being, lacking in the dignity which refuses to sell life for money. He is a man who identifies himself with his warring and who, as we have said, demands respect for his worth. How is he able to make himself so Venetian? It is surely, in part, his Christianity that is responsible. He is engaged in a war against the Turks, and he believes that the unity of true Christians is a kind of brotherhood, a brotherhood of such an overpowering influence that local differences pale into insignificance. He has something of the character of a Christian knight-errant, going from place to place, honored and worthwhile wherever men hold the faith. (It is important to remark that Othello is born a stranger to Christianity as well as to Venice. In respect to both religion and race he is by birth closer to the Turks.) The local, the political in the ancient sense, does not weigh so heavily on a man in the Christian context. This community of faith allows Othello to fight his war and care about its

<sup>18</sup> Precisely what he has done for Venice, we do not learn. But that he has a great repute as a leader is made clear enough: I, iii, 249–252; IV, i, 295–296.

<sup>19</sup> This question evidently preoccupied Shakespeare very much for he treats of it again, in another way, in *Coriolanus*. This is the case of a man very much at home in Rome but who resents his dependence on what he considers to be the vulgar mass; he wants to be free of what created him; and, in attempting to liberate himself, he loses his soul. The problem is again to what extent the hero is free of those who acclaim him. Coriolannus is very conscious of the problem, whereas Othello is not; this is why the former leaves Rome and the latter can stay in Venice.

purposes without assuming the comic aspect of the outsider who interests himself in what is none of his business, or the vulgar one of the hired agent. The faith provides a cosmopolitanism which is not limited by the accident of birth or the peculiarity of education, or the difference in social position. The importance of Othello's Christianity, both for his own sense of dignity and purpose and for the possibility of his stepping over boundaries that would otherwise have been insuperable, cannot be overestimated. If Christianity is really the one most needful thing, then he who is its defender deserves honor and reverence and within its universal unity there are no strangers. Othello's last words recall again that he is one of the best of the faithful; and if he is attached to Venice it is because he can regard the city as an instrument of the faith.<sup>20</sup>

But it is very questionable whether Othello is venerated as much as he thinks, or in the way that he thinks. He believes that he is cared for as a citizen is cared for, that there are not two standards of affection and justice, one for those who belong and one for those who are outside. Othello does not consider himself to be a means, a tool in the hands of Venice, but an end, a being worthwhile in himself. Yet we find him at the beginning of the play having been out of employment for nine months. Iago believes that Othello is used only because at the moment there is no one else to command.<sup>21</sup> And there is the overwhelming fact that as soon as the victory is achieved, Othello is cashiered. There is little question but that he is used sparingly and only for the pressing needs of Venice; he is not a citizen.<sup>22</sup> But further it is of the utmost importance to understand

<sup>20</sup> II, ii, 194-196; V, ii, 427-429; II, ii, 373-375; V, ii, 36-37. Brabantio calls him a pagan, I, ii, 121.

<sup>21</sup> I, i, 162-168. The Duke asks after a certain Marcus Luccicos, who, as it turns out, is not in Venice; he sends after Marcus in the same terms in which he sent after Othello: I, iii, 52-56; cf. I, ii, 43-45.

<sup>22</sup> Othello's victory over Brabantio in the hearing before the Duke is a good model of the strengths and weaknesses of his situation. The moment at which Brabantio must make his plea is a troubled and confused one, the state is endangered and foreign threats cause Othello to be needed. When they enter together, the confident Brabantio (I, ii, 115-121) is completely ignored by the suave Duke who looks to Othello immediately (I, iii, 60 ff.). The justice of the case is evidently not so much to be considered as the current crisis and the fact that Othello is indispensable in it. The ordinary order of respect and indulgence is temporarily abridged. The Duke is polite to Brabantio (it is questionable how much Brabantio's person, as opposed to his position, wealth and family, was actually respected in the city, for he had not been called to the council and he was to have been found at home); and when he hears Brabantio's complaint he promises all support before he finds out who is responsible. As soon as he hears Othello's name, he changes his tone and gives Othello every chance to defend himself. One can well wonder how the Duke would have behaved in other conditions, and if he would then have permitted such a marriage without the father's consent or allowed a foreigner such rights in the city. At all events he supports Othello while trying to assuage Brabantio. He moralizes with the embittered Brabantio who justly responds that it is easy for one who is unhurt to give sympathy. The Duke is a subtle statesman: he attempts to give the appearance of perfect morality while keeping his eye on the expedient. Shakespeare expresses this beautifully by putting the Duke's moralizing into rhyming verse. Afterwards he reverts to ordinary prose as soon as he is able to treat of the serious business at hand.

that he is not so much the best general, as reputed to be the best general. The Duke says this.<sup>23</sup> Othello is a man of great reputation and, as Iago makes clear, there is a decisive difference between reputation and true deserving.<sup>24</sup> Othello is trusted; but in the play we are given no examples of his prowess, unlike the men of action portrayed in other plays. His only military success is the result of chance, of a *tempest*. For it, he proclaims a victory and his reputation is thereby enhanced. But he is not actually responsible for the victory proclaimed. Desdemona loves him for his stories. He is, as Iago says, a great talker of war.

I do not suggest that Othello had never done anything to deserve his reputation; I only point out that we are never given any direct testimony or evidence of what he did, while we are given to see that he imposes himself on others by his reputation. He seems to be a case of men's need for a hero. Every city and every army needs leaders, and those leaders, in order to command, must be respected and even idolized. No matter what their merit, in order to feel the confidence that is necessary to the dangerous enterprise of war, they must be invested with authority. Around them spring up myths, not created by them but arising from the popular need. So that they can subordinate themselves to their leaders, the people endow them with superhuman merits. Othello is a man on whom "opinion throws a more safer voice"; and opinion is a "sovereign mistress of effects." He is known to the Duke to be valuable because he is generally well thought of. Othello is sure of himself because he is respected; he

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He gets over what is for him the very inconvenient and unpleasant affair of Desdemona's marriage with rhetoric to return to the important consideration, which has really determined his decision; and real business is prosaic (I, iii, 225-254). But Othello's advantage in a crisis disappears with his very success. In the first lines of the play, Iago irritates Roderigo's civic pride by presenting Othello as a foreigner lording it over the native nobility (I, i, 12-14). The prejudice is always lying in wait for the moment when no compelling reasons demand its repression. Cf. I, i, 138-139, 148-158. Brabantio remains in Venice and is still a force to be reckoned with; the anger of Brabantio can make the Duke uncomfortable, for Brabantio is always in Venice and is independent of any appointment or crisis; Othello can be sent away and forgotten with no inconvenience to anyone if there is no external danger to the state. Perhaps Othello's recall was Brabantio's doing? At least this is what Desdemona guesses that Othello suspects (IV, ii, 53-56).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. note 18.

<sup>24</sup> II, ii, 291-305. Iago can very well appreciate the ambiguous character of reputation for he enjoys a good one himself. But when Iago speaks to Othello, he does so as though there were nothing questionable in reputation (III, ii, 181-188). He knows his man. A noble man never does anything that is considered shameful and the opinion of his fellows is the guarantee of his own goodness. A man who cares about his reputation is likely to perform acts of a nature to gain it; while the man who consults only his private inclinations is likely to be base. But, if reputation is a fickle thing, then the whole orientation of the gentleman or the proud man is placed in doubt. The perfect disciple of Othello is Cassio; he believes completely in Othello; this is the source of his unquestioning devotion and makes him a perfect lieutenant. But, from what he suffers and the undeserving way he loses his reputation, the lesson would seem to be that it is folly to live for the sake of others who do not understand and are acting from their own passions. Cassio expresses what his faith in Othello means when he says that reputation is the immortal part of himself (II, ii, 291-292; cf. 117-135; *Romans* IX, 18; VIII, 24).

is respected so that others can be confident in danger. It is a circle which is not grounded in a reality free from opinion.

For Othello this means that, if the opinions change, he is lost; for he has no source of confidence outside of a city that is not his own city. His Christianity proves to be not enough to overcome the primeval and necessary prejudices of civil society. In some measure his very character depended on his ignorance of the source of his strength. He assumed his reputation was deserved and was secure. To the extent that he felt this, he could be at home in Venice. There was no tension between his foreignness, his universality, and his need for Venetian, and hence local, opinion in which to see himself as in a glass. To use his practical abilities as a warrior Othello needed a home, a place for which he could fight meaningfully, and this required a reputation. The argument of the play is that such reputations are only given grudgingly and conditionally to foreigners. Yet Othello could never accept this and still be able to fight in the citizen's or proud man's spirit. The massiveness of his self-assurance in the face of the tenuousness of his real position shows that his life is based upon a critical lack of self-knowledge.

Othello, although radically dependent, represents himself as completely independent; and the myth of his independence seems to be less for his own benefit than for the sake of those who made him. They could not trust him if they knew him to be their own creation. The very end of the creation requires that the knowledge that it was creation and not discovery be forgotten. This is a necessary self-deception without which the purposes of myth-making would be frustrated. All might have succeeded, there might have been no revelation of Othello's true situation, if he had not gone one step too far in the direction of his conquest of Venice. That step was his falling in love with Desdemona and marrying her. In Desdemona he had chosen the fairest flower of the best family in Venice. In marrying her he seemed to prove that he was fully lovable in Venice by Venetians, that he had fully naturalized himself. In the manner of his wooing he continues the masquerade that not he but Desdemona is the one who needs; she is the lover and he the beloved.<sup>25</sup> He is still the independent being to whom others come because of his qualities. But Iago knows this is not true. It is his awareness of Othello's absolute dependence on Desdemona, of which Othello is himself totally unaware, that allows Iago to bring about the destruction which he plots.

#### IV

Love, according to the classical analysis, means imperfection, need. The motion of one being toward another, the recognition of something admirable in another, implies the lack of something in the one admiring.<sup>26</sup> What a man

<sup>25</sup> I, iii, 190-191; III, iii, 218.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 189c-193e, 199d-204c; the *Lysis (in toto)* and Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, vii, 4; Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part I, Ch. xiv. This is so even in the highest sort of love, the good man who admires another good man because he sees his own virtues mirrored in the other and can honor them as he could not his own. Such love is based on the need for mutual admiration and a completion of one's own imperfect virtues. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX, ix.

desires to possess, he does not already possess. The desire to possess another human being implies that qualities belonging to the beloved object are lacking to the lover. Hence a perfect being would not love, because he would possess all that is admirable within himself; there would be no sufficient reason for him to go outside himself. He who pretends to love without needing is an impostor. The lover admits by his very love a dependence and in this sense an inferiority to his beloved. The beloved, as beloved, does not return love; the man who is loved for his learning does not love the lover for his ignorance. If he returns love at all, he does so for some other reason, because the lover has some other virtue which in his turn makes him an object of love. One who loves does not, for that reason, have any claim on the affections of the one he loves; on the contrary, he has, in loving, made an admission of imperfection which the beloved is under no obligation to reciprocate. The beloved has the privileged position and the lover, if his affection is not returned, must become conscious of unworthiness, and begin to lack confidence in himself. His value as a human being is called into question; but he has no right to complain, for love is not a question of duty.

Nonetheless, every lover desires to be loved in return. For only by the return of love can he possess the beloved; and, moreover, his self-esteem is at stake. He has, at the moment he committed himself, become dependent upon another for his self-esteem. At the same time he has made his situation doubly difficult by having to some extent admitted himself to be undeserving, by the fact of loving. Othello is unaware of his need for Desdemona; he believes that she loves him and he is secure in his estimate of himself. But he truly loves her love and requires it for his very existence. He says he is no more when he is unloved. Iago discerns this; Othello, says Iago, would renounce his baptism for her; "her appetite shall play the god with his weak function."<sup>27</sup> At Othello's first glimmerings of recognition of his situation he says, "when I love thee not, chaos is come again." The world in which he lives was created by his love and is dependent on the continuation of that love. Iago's success is based upon his making Othello realize both his attachment to Desdemona, and also that this attachment does not necessarily deserve a recompense. Othello now needs a proof of love to justify his own existence. The whole house of cards in which he has lived starts to tumble.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> II, ii, 376-379. Shakespeare vividly depicts Othello's first consciousness of the depth and intensity of his need when, after Iago's first tentative barbs, Desdemona arrives to plead for Cassio. He for the first time is a little vexed; all is not perfect as formerly but as she goes away he cannot help admiring her and says, "Excellent wretch!" (III, iii, 104-106). He sees, with a certain pleasure, that he needs her very much and that it is somewhat in spite of himself, that it has nothing to do with right or justice. A few moments later, when his suspicions become explicit, he denies this and says he would let her go if she were false; he soon realizes that whatever she be, he must possess her or kill her, that he cannot do without her.

<sup>28</sup> The importance of Desdemona to Othello as a tribute is clear when his rage against her reaches its height at the moment he is recalled by Venice. The crude impression which those who witness it have, that he is disturbed by losing his position, is not totally un-

When Othello begins to need the proof of love, he also begins to realize that proofs of love may be impossible to come by, especially for "great ones" towards whom those in inferior positions are likely to use all the wiles of persuasion and deception. Except by the omniscient, the motions of the human soul cannot be observed. Acts are never sure proof because they are ambiguous, especially in matters of love. One can never know for certain what another thinks of him, and when that knowledge is required the quest for certainty can be the cruellest of torments to which a human being can be subjected. Iago makes this clear to Othello in masterful fashion, first by refusing to tell him what he knows about Cassio and Desdemona, while claiming that even a slave is free as to his innermost thoughts.<sup>29</sup> As love can only be free, nature has so constructed man that his loves and hates can be hidden from observation, a concealment which is the precondition of freedom. Then Iago with prodigious obscenity, shocking the most revered beliefs and presenting him with pictures of the realization of his most dreaded fears, shows him that one can never tell what an act means.<sup>30</sup>

It is at this point that jealousy becomes dominant and triumphs. *Othello* is admittedly the story of a jealous man and it is in the analysis of the origin and the consequences of this terrible passion that the play fulfills itself. Jealousy is in itself a passion of the weak and the contemptible, or so it is generally felt to be. The other characters who suffer it in the play—Roderigo, Iago, and Bianca—are base figures. So it is that when the confident Othello becomes a victim of jealousy his tragedy is already complete; he has lost all that which he was or pretended to be. Nonetheless, in spite of its intrinsic pettiness, jealousy takes on a certain grandeur when it occurs in a man of Othello's proportions; the size and depth of his hopes lend themselves to his sense of loss and his furies are in proportion to the nobility of his deceived ambitions. And, moreover, jealousy as understood traditionally, was not always a contemptible and ridiculous passion. There was one great example of it which, if it could not stand as a model for others' imitation, gave a certain cosmic significance to the passion:

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justified, with the qualification that it be understood in the deep sense in which his position is meaningful to him. He is ambitious, but in no vulgar way (IV, i, 231-317).

<sup>29</sup> III, iii, 158-160.

<sup>30</sup> III, iii, 455-456, 471-486, 499-501. By the beginning of Act IV the discussion of the meaning of physical acts has turned into a gruesome and tantalizing game (IV, i, 1-26). The obscenity of Iago is founded on that which is revered by others. For both Brabantio and Othello, the purity of Desdemona is all in all. The shocking aspect of Iago's speech is not that he speaks freely about sensual matters, but that for others these things are sacred and Iago profanes what is holy for them. It is only in the context of reverence that Iago's speech is terrible; it is a sort of blasphemy. The relation between Othello and Desdemona, if there is any physical element to it at all, is largely a spiritual one. When he realizes that perhaps physical satisfactions are important for her and he sees his own insufficiency in this regard, her possible infidelity becomes all the more horrible for him. It is not only that she cares for another but that her being is so constituted that he could never satisfy her. He must insist not only on fidelity but chastity; he must change her nature and all men's natures, and all this not for the sake of morality but to preserve for himself that which he wants.

the God of the Old Testament who commands love and promises revenge unto the third and fourth generation for those who are not obedient.<sup>31</sup> Although God's jealousy cannot be an object of human imitation, and far transcends the disappointment of deceived husbands, it could not help but add significance to the jealousy of ordinary mortals. God's anger at those who transgress the commandment has a similarity to the anger of men who are deceived; to understand what God's jealousy is, men must begin from the only experience of jealousy they have, *i.e.*, human jealousy. And with the sanctity brought to marriage by Judaism and Christianity, even the motives take on a certain similarity; the jealous husband takes a just vengeance for the violation of a sacred commandment. The husband is made in the image of the Lord.

This is not to say that the Old Testament God justifies human jealousy; it is only that His jealousy gives jealousy in general a significance it would not have in a non-Biblical context. It would be difficult to imagine a Greek play whose hero is primarily characterized by the false suspicion of his wife's infidelity; this would be a subject of comedy. Shakespeare has succeeded in this *tour de force* because the enlarged sense of the word jealousy unconsciously affects our perception of those who suffer it. Shakespeare's Othello does act out on the human scene a god's role;<sup>32</sup> he is a universal stranger, a leader who can command and punish wherever he goes. He insists on honor and wreaks bloody vengeance on those who disobey. Shakespeare analyzes the sophistry of the heart of a man who tries thus to be divine.

This stranger from Africa comes to Venice, in a gentle guise, insisting on nothing from anyone. He takes the respect and affection given him as free gift and is himself a lover. But from his love emerges jealousy and an insistence

<sup>31</sup> God's jealousy in relation to Israel in the Old Testament is interpreted in parable as the relation of a man to a faithless woman (Ezekiel 16, 38); and, in general, the action of God is understood in analogy to the conduct of husbands. Because of the sanctity of marriage, the husband's care gains greater justice, and because of the holiness of the husband's jealousy, the analogy of God's jealousy to that of man is not obnoxious. Jealousy, the emotion accompanying the *suspicion* of infidelity, is not an important theme outside the Biblical tradition. "Ein Beleg für die Bdtg. Eifersucht speziell im Verhältniss von Ehegatten ist mir im klass. Griech. nicht begegnet" (A. Stumpf in Kittel's *Theologische Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament*, Stuttgart, 1935, p. 879). No treatment of the subject can be found in Greek literature on the passions. At the least, it can be said that fidelity to, and love of, God take on a new and special sense when it is understood that God commands them because he is jealous. The magnitude of Othello's jealousy, both in its understanding of marriage and its *imitatio Dei*, is inconceivable without the Bible.

Shakespeare draws out the parallel in presenting the relationship between Othello and Desdemona as spiritual with the physical motivations appearing as the great sin. Immediately before declaring his jealousy, the God of the *Old Testament* specifies the meaning of infidelity: the worship of physical objects—all that paganism implied (Exodus xx, 4-6; cf. IV, i, 137).

<sup>32</sup> II, ii, 232-234; III, iii, 417-419; V, ii, 110, 57 (cf. Mark iv, 39), 165 (cf. Deut. xxii, 21), 167 (cf. Gen. xlix, 4). Othello's arrogation of god-like prerogatives is clearest in the assurance with which he judges, prior to his jealousy in a calm confidence in his superiority to others, later in the righteous intensity of his fury. When he learns he was in error, he is nothing—he is either perfection or nothingness.

more intense than could have previously been imagined. Jealousy, as Iago says, is doubt. It is the accompaniment of love that is unrequited or suspected of being so. Jealousy implies a lack of self-assurance; the man who knows he is worthy of love will not be jealous—if his wife is unfaithful, he will no longer deem her worthy of his love. He is himself the touchstone; this is precisely the attitude that Othello thinks he must take and says he will take.<sup>33</sup> He will forget Desdemona. Jealousy is contemptible because it bespeaks imperfection; he who suffers it must either think himself unlovable or the one he loves corrupt; but nevertheless he continues to love and think it right to love and be loved.

Jealousy rarely, if ever, sees itself as jealousy. Rather is it reflected in the soul it possesses as justice. The revenge worked by jealousy is said to be the desert of the victim. She was unfaithful. But is being unfaithful necessarily a crime, if the one who insists on love does not deserve it? A man who passes sentence in his own interest, for the sake of preserving what is his own or punishing what refuses to be his, is not a judge but a tyrant. He insists that love be given; but only conformity, not love, can be gained by force; love is a free gift. A love which insists on return is violence. However that may be, the jealous man cannot admit that it is jealousy that motivates him, for he would then confess himself to be acting for himself and contrary to the interests of those he judges. He must pretend that he has been wronged, that he truly deserved love. And the proof of deserving love is being loved.

Othello appears as a judge. Indeed, his only actions in the play are judgments. We have two such examples, the comparison of which is instructive for our understanding of Othello's real claims. Those judgments are of Cassio and Desdemona. His judgment of Cassio is in a way a preparation for that of Desdemona. It gives us a hint of Othello's merits and limitations as judge.

Cassio, inveigled by Iago into drinking, causes a disturbance. Othello arrives on the scene. He is completely in command and assumes that all will bend to his least word or gesture; his jealousy has not yet risen.<sup>34</sup> He summarily dismisses Cassio. To do so is perfectly correct from the point of view of human justice. Cassio is a soldier and has been drinking before going on duty. The unfortunate circumstances that led him into trouble do not excuse him from the responsibilities of an officer. But Shakespeare has presented the scene in such a way that we know that from the point of view of complete justice this is a miscarriage. Cassio has been duped and has been made to appear fully responsible. The real culprit is Iago. Othello is a decent general doing justice on the basis of acts done. He does not try to pry into hidden motives. He judges by the surface. Every judge must believe that he knows the principles of justice, and that he is personally disinterested in those judged. He must have some source of knowledge which he believes to be certain, or he could not in conscience judge other men. Judges receive this knowledge from the law. Othello proceeds with Cassio according to the rules of military discipline. These rules are limited in scope. Yet they express what all would admit is a true form of justice, whose

<sup>33</sup> III, iii, 205–221.

<sup>34</sup> II, ii, 229–234, 288–292

limits are due to the limited nature of their purpose—military discipline—and not to partiality or hypocrisy.

The judgment of Desdemona is in sharp contrast with this. Here Othello judges not external actions, but intentions, the innermost movements of a soul. He does not need proof of acts.<sup>35</sup> He is led by his uncertainty to assume the guilty act. Rendered mad by this assumption, he wants only to prove that Desdemona is unfaithful. He still regards himself as the dispenser of justice. But now it is no longer the health of the military order that supports his authority, but his right to be loved. His need for her love has been converted into a duty for her to love, a duty which he takes it upon himself to judge. But a judge should have no interest in the one he judges. As his doubt has grown, his whole way of life and manner of understanding has changed. He is no longer free and open of manner nor trusting of disposition. He is suspicious. Acts no longer mean to Othello what they seem to mean. Decent appearances now conceal an underlying viciousness. And this viciousness can be said to be physical passion. Chastity has become a cult with him.<sup>36</sup> Desdemona's free offer of a chaste love, which was so unexpected and which he accepted as his due, he now insists upon. Now, however, he believes this offer to be unnatural; men are naturally lustful beasts; chastity without compulsion becomes unintelligible to him. Desdemona must be sequestered from society and compelled to spend her life in prayer if she is to be purged of the appetites that make her unworthy of Othello.<sup>37</sup> On the basis of his need he wishes to force men counter to their natures; what was supposed to be love now turns into a tyranny. With it comes a peculiarly low view of mankind. Iago becomes the high priest of this cult, leading Othello "by the nose." Iago converts all men into obscene beasts in Othello's eyes. He shows Othello that the love and honor due him is destroyed by physical passion; human beings are naturally led to care for things of the flesh. In order to be believed in, Othello must change this; his jealousy, under Iago's guidance, becomes a demand for inhuman purity, for a renunciation of the worship of the body. Iago has only to suggest obscene motivations and Othello is ready to wreak vengeance on any who are suspected. Iago makes use of an intense hate and fear of lust on Othello's part to further his own ends. Iago becomes a moralizer on the very bases of his lewd preoccupations. His moralizing reaches its almost comic peak when he comments on Cassio's fate, "This is the fruit of whoring."<sup>38</sup> He is a priest who makes use of Othello's new

<sup>35</sup> Othello does indeed begin by demanding deeds, ocular proof, as was his custom. He does not want to be led by simple sentiments; he wants to do justice. But Iago skillfully shows him that in such matters direct proof is impossible and Othello is satisfied with ritual proofs turned into "confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ" (III, iii, 375-377) by the mad assurance that all men are base and inclined to acts of treachery; jealousy presupposes guilt and seeks for substantiation (III, iii, 219-221, 415-514).

<sup>36</sup> III, iii, 312-314; III, iv, 46-52; IV, i, 9-12; ii, 24-27. At the end, even the stars are the signs of a cosmic chastity, V, ii, 4.

<sup>37</sup> III, iv, 43-56.

<sup>38</sup> Iago's use of morality is fully conscious and based on his observation of Othello. Actually, the attitude he takes is much nearer that of those who are attached to Othello

morality to conceal his private ends. I know of no play within which physical passion is believed to be so much the source of the action and, in reality, is so little the source of any important thing. More subtle vices of the soul are the roots of the action.

The new attempt to control souls leads of necessity to a new method of understanding men. Souls cannot be seen. Of course a justice which saw men's souls naked would be vastly superior to the old justice, in which judgment was rendered only on the basis of acts committed. But perhaps the old way was founded on a prudent reserve, or modesty, which recognized the limitations of human vision. The result of the new way is not truly to see the soul but rather to reject all the evidence of action and to turn to signs which in themselves have no meaning. Desdemona is judged by the handkerchief, that handkerchief on which the whole judgment turns. It is a magic charm, of superhuman quality, and only through it can she control Othello.<sup>39</sup> When she does not appear to show sufficient respect for this object, this mere thing, she is guilty and her soul is laid bare. Mere routine or ritual is the basis of the judgment of Desdemona. The attempt to do away with the superficiality of the old law leads to a mysticism which is even more distant from truth.

Othello commits his terrible crime for the sake of justice. The horror of the murder only reflects the fact that justice must be stern. If Othello is right about Desdemona's deed and is further correct in assuming that her only salvation would be in loving him, then his cruelty would be but terrible responsibility. He may justly say that "I who am cruel, am yet merciful."<sup>40</sup> Mercy can appear in this gruesome context because Othello's bloodiness is an integral part of the human scene in the new context created by him, and any attempt to soften the lot of those under his sovereignty can be regarded as mercy. On the basis of the new justice of love, a cruelty and passion that never before existed comes into being.

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than his own natural one. Cassio, when dismissed by Othello, speaks in terms worthy of the most severe moralist, "the devil wine, the devil anger," etc. In talking to him, Iago takes a reasonable and tolerant line (II, ii, 292-343). Cassio orients himself according to the pleasure and displeasure of Othello and in his fall from grace blames himself with extraordinary severity; rather than trying to reestablish himself, he falls into a state of repentance and self-castigation. Desdemona is much the same way. Both torment only themselves and Iago sees where this attitude can lead if made cynical use of. If those who love Othello are dependent on his opinion and he is jealous and frightened of losing their love, Iago, by playing on Othello's fear can cause him to make more and more demands on others and so further his own ends (*e.g.*, his suggestion that fear is the best way to control Desdemona, III, iii, 236-238). All he need do is present Othello with new dangers and his standards become ever higher and sterner. Othello's sick fears convert innocent human acts into crimes. The height of the morality comes only from Iago's low view of men. Cassio's harmless weakness at drink and his love for women can in this context be converted into mortal sins. It is interesting to note that Othello's tyranny is prefigured by Brabantio's reaction upon recognizing that he is deceived, I, iii, 221-224.

<sup>39</sup> III, iv, 68-81. Shakespeare has taken the handkerchief, a much less significant element in the source, Cinthio's *novella*, and rendered it a magic charm in which the whole proof of Othello's suspicions is centered and fulfilled. It is the sole and sufficient cause of Desdemona's death.

<sup>40</sup> V, ii, 110.

## V

Othello sought to accomplish an extreme human feat; he attempted to be a hero without a home, without a city to sing his praises and write his epitaph. He did this under the guise of universality; only if a man is liberated from the influence of and need for the laws and ways of a particular nation can he go anywhere and be a hero. But this universality, Shakespeare seems to tell us, is a lie. If a man can liberate himself from a particular time and place it cannot be as a hero, statesman, or soldier. Such careers are by their nature bound to the fortunes of cities of men, all of which have special needs and traditions. Those who follow these pathways seek glory as their reward, and glory is dependent upon a public. The hero is perforce attached to the place whence his glory comes and he must believe somehow in the special importance and excellence of that place. This represents a denial of the universal standpoint; it is part of the necessary narrowing of the statesman's horizon. Othello's universality only conceals a desire to be limited and local; it is itself an inflated shadow of the ordinary man's limitations; it is his tool for entry into Venice. Man's eternal aspiration to be man and man alone is burlesqued and travestied; what should be truly an end in itself, and masquerades as such, is but a means in Othello's usage. He pretends to be lovable because he is good, but actually his goodness is only an appearance to enable him to be loved. As long as he believes his own myth he can be gentle, for he thinks that what he demands from men is natural. But when he comes to doubt, he believes that what he demands is against nature. His jealousy then becomes his weapon to bend men to his will. His barbaric nature now reveals itself; but it is barbarism transformed and intensified.

His final tragedy consists not so much in killing Desdemona, but in the discovery of his own injustice—that his justice is not justice at all. He discovers that what he thought was justice was but a way of gratifying his own appetite, an appetite whose existence it was of the essence of his being not to recognize. His jealousy arises when he realizes that he is a dependent being, that he needs. His tragedy is complete when it becomes clear that he does not deserve fulfillment but only desires it. He has done terrible deeds under the conviction of his own wisdom; but he is nothing. Othello is a figure of enormous proportions; no reader can fail to sense this. Yet he is curiously insubstantial. And this is Shakespeare's meaning; he is a name without a substance. He lives in men's minds and needs more than in any reality. Both for his own sake and for that of the Venetians, he had to be thought a perfect being, but he was only a being afflicted with human passion. The intensity of the ending comes from the loud bursting of an enormous bubble which vanishes into nothingness.<sup>41</sup> His last words protest his everlasting loyalty to Venice.

Shakespeare appears to tell us that it is not good to introduce influences that are too foreign, regardless of the guise under which they may come. The benevolence of foreign influences is always ambiguous. What is not native will

<sup>41</sup> V, ii, 304-307; *cf.* III, iii, 403-413.

at some point go against the grain of what is native; it must then tyrannize or succumb. Venice did not suffer from it but Desdemona did; Venice knew when to "cast him." Universality on the purely political level does not conduce to the city's good.

## VI

Let us turn now to Desdemona. Her selfless devotion to Othello and her sweetness make her a peculiarly undeserving subject for tragic suffering. Her death seems deeply offensive. It must be asked if there is anything in her nature that makes her fate in any way appropriate. Is she senselessly destroyed, a harmless bystander caught in the backlash of the unreeling of Othello's life?

The answer to this question is dependent on an understanding of her love. What was the source of her involvement in this strange romance? The absolute source was Othello's speeches. But this is not enough in itself; we must discover to what these speeches appealed. We learn from her father that she was ordinarily a very quiet and shy girl, a soft and gentle character. But at the same time we know that she was independent, that she knew her own wishes. She had "shunned the wealthy curled darlings" of Venice; she was not satisfied with the best of Venice.<sup>42</sup> She wanted to love something beyond the Venetian. And this Othello provided. His stories of strange lands and great adventures seemed to give evidence of an experience and knowledge beyond the conventional. She felt that her limited life was not sufficient; we see in her an embryonic passion for the universal, a desire not to be duped by life. But she is undirected. What is merely different and strange impresses her as more significant and real. Whether Othello believes them or not, his stories contain much that could not possibly be true; they are, as Iago says, fantastic.<sup>43</sup> They appeal to Desdemona's imagination which was watered with loneliness and shyness. She is exactly as her name describes her: superstitious.<sup>44</sup> Her devotion to

<sup>42</sup> I, iii, 113-115; I, ii, 83.

<sup>43</sup> I, iii, 166-168; II, i, 255-257.

<sup>44</sup> In this etymology of the name I follow Shaftesbury in considering it to be derived from the Greek *δεισιδαίμων*, while the later interpreters have unanimously understood it as stemming from *δυσδαίμων*, meaning ill-starred or ill-fated. One cannot of course lean too heavily on the supposed etymology of a name in the interpretation of a play, especially when that etymology is itself disputable. But it seems certain that Shakespeare often chose names which had an overtone of their bearer's character (*cf.* Ruskin, *Munera Pulveris* in *Works*, London, 1905, p. 257); and in this case both meanings would apply extremely well. My preference for the meaning *superstitious* is grounded on a general observation of her nature and the suitability of applying such a term to her. As far as I am able to see there are no philological grounds for the preference of the one interpretation over the other, so that one must rely on one's interpretation of the play to justify the sense of the name. If the interpretation is convincing, the name gives a certain added weight. The other interpreters who have treated this problem have based their choice almost exclusively on a belief that Desdemona was unlucky and that this constitutes her essence; the meaning of her name is only an expression of this. The burden of this essay has been to prove that it is not simply ill fortune that constitutes the core of her tragedy. The reader must himself judge of the plausibility of the two etymologies because scholarship can go no further. As is frequent in scholarly matters, an assumption as to the certitude of a questionable

Othello exalts her, and her choice to seek for meaning beyond accepted belief lends her a dignity which the ordinary citizen cannot have. But it was a choice conceived in error; Othello was a creation of her mind. She believed his speeches about his deeds. And, paradoxically, her love sought in Othello something independent and free, while that very love made him dependent, and bound his seeming universality to something particular. They passed each other by, as it were, on the path of love. Most paradoxical of all, in order to free herself from Venice she loves a creation of Venice. Instead of winning her freedom she became all the more enfeathered to the thing she was trying to escape: Othello existed only in the mind of Venice. Desdemona gave herself completely and with passion to something beyond the physical, but to a something conceived in error. In giving up all for the sake of cosmopolitanism she was a follower of the most characteristic expression of the political community: its myths about its leaders. Desdemona, the only figure in the play who is indifferent to popular opinion, becomes a prisoner of the opinion about Othello.

Desdemona's superstition is not the only cause of her death. Her fidelity is also a necessary condition. She was not only attracted by Othello's stories, but she believed and insisted on keeping faith with him no matter what he did. The appearance of his actions is unimportant; he must be followed and loved regardless of his deeds, for his ends are inscrutable. She believes in him so completely that she must deny the validity of common sense in order to justify him. What appears like injustice from an ordinary point of view must appear to Desdemona as justice punishing some supposed vice or sin in herself or others. If he is to be believed in, although he acts contrary to ordinary human standards, then she must say that those standards are meaningless or are mis-

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interpretation seems to provide scientific proof of issues really contingent on that interpretation. Only if a Shaftesbury is certainly wrong in his understanding of *Othello* can it be definitely decided that *ill-starred* is what was meant by Shakespeare.

Whatever confirming evidence there is, is ambiguous. Shakespeare's source, Cinthio, contained only this one name which was taken over by Shakespeare. In Cinthio, the name almost certainly means *ill-starred*; but this does not prove that Shakespeare could not have altered this just as he re-interprets the entire character and gives it a new significance. One relevant fact is that Shakespeare alters Cinthio's spelling of the name; in the *novella* it is *Disdemona*. The *i* or *y* are the conventional transliterations of the Greek *υ* which would clearly seem to mean that the etymology is *δυσδαίμων*. Shakespeare's substitution of *e* for *i*, if it is not for inevident reasons of euphony, would render the name closer to *δεισιδαίμων*. From Theophrastus, if not earlier, on down, the *δεισιδαίμων* or superstitious man is one of the conventional human types, a character that is painted in literature for the sake of instructing audiences about common and dangerous errors. Plutarch wrote a treatise about it which could easily have been read by Shakespeare. In Plutarch's work, the superstitious man is contrasted with the atheist—presented as having contrary false opinions about the nature of the gods. The two characters, as outlined by Plutarch, have striking similarities to Desdemona and Iago respectively.

Finally, the two derivatives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, see below, p. 154. Cf. John Upton, *Critical Observations on Shakespeare* (London, 1746), p. 288; John Wesley Hales, *Notes and Essays on Shakespeare*, London, 1884, p. 111; Albert Tesch, "Zum Namen Desdemona," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, XVII (1929), pp. 587-588.

conceived in this higher context. She accepts that new way of judging souls that resulted from Othello's jealousy; the clear appearance of things is rejected and some mysterious standard dependent on Othello's whim becomes the rule. Of course the real source of this standard is Othello's need to make himself loved absolutely and uncontingently. But that true source is transformed and represented as a hidden meaning to life, one that can be revealed only through Othello. And in Desdemona there begins a sort of self-examination; no longer does she look to the surface meaning of words and deeds, but her conscience bids her to search out faults which her reason does not see. Cassio did much the same thing when dismissed by Othello; all moral value comes from Othello and what he does not approve is bad. Othello does not depend on nature but nature on Othello. This leads to new habits of mind, new virtues.

Desdemona, in her conversation with Emilia, states her principle clearly: fidelity and only fidelity—everything subordinated to it. It is noble, without doubt, but it certainly is not so reasonable as the statement of Emilia, who makes fidelity dependent on the deeds of the husband. Her morality is an easy-going one that does not attach so much significance to chastity. In herself she is not so fine a person as Desdemona, but perhaps true and untragic nobility cannot be reached by the sanctification of marital fidelity. And Emilia, for all her inferiority, may yet serve to point this out. For Emilia, the simple world of common-sense meanings and the evident justice of acts must dictate to fidelity: fidelity cannot be unconditional. For Desdemona, everything must be interpreted in such a way as to preserve her faith.<sup>45</sup>

Desdemona's faith in Othello leads her to a certain disregard for the truth which has not often enough been observed. We see her practicing deception three times in the play, and each time with great significance for her fate. In the first place she hides her relationship with Othello from her father, and presents him with the *fait accompli*. However indulgently we may look upon her love for Othello, there is no question but that she is guilty of disobedience; and her love comes into conflict with most sacred duties. The love of Othello leads the best of the city's children to a contempt for it and a willingness to break the law for his sake. In any case of conflict of loyalties, Desdemona chooses without hesitation in favor of Othello; it seems that this shy girl gained so much strength and confidence, or such fanaticism, from her love that she is capable of doing things in a cool spirit that others would be unable to do. And it must be remembered that the consequence of this deception was the death of her father.<sup>46</sup> In the second case, she lied to Othello about the handkerchief. Here is perhaps the clearest indication of her superstitious nature: she was so frightened by the significance Othello attached to the handkerchief and the tale he told her about it that she did not dare to let him know that she had lost it. This untruth led directly to her own death.<sup>47</sup> And finally, she seems to tell a lie even after death. She says that Othello did not kill her.

<sup>45</sup> IV, iii, 66–116, 24–26, ii, 81, 131–145, 177–193; III, iii, 89–96, 103, iv, 162–176.

<sup>46</sup> V, ii, 255–261.

<sup>47</sup> III, iv, 95–104.

She still tries to preserve his reputation; for she would die in vain if he were evil. His reputation lives in her and not in him. To the end, she must see things as she wants them to be rather than as they are. Believing is seeing.<sup>48</sup>

Desdemona's death is in large measure due to her own errors. They were noble errors, errors which elevated her above the level of ordinary humanity, but they deserved punishment. From the point of view of everyday life, Desdemona sins in deceiving her father. We take her side because she does so in the name of something higher. But perhaps from a third and highest standpoint we must come to the defense of civil society and see her defection as a result of a monstrous misconception. Perhaps the true cosmopolitanism can be attained only by renouncing the dearest hopes of practical life. Marriage is a part of political life, of civil society. One cannot purify it of its political element without depriving it of its substance.

Desdemona has been compared to Cordelia and Miranda, and with much justice. She is independent, courageous, and gentle, as is the former, and she has a sweet ingenuousness like the latter (in the spirit of "oh, brave new world"). But Desdemona lacks Cordelia's love of the truth which causes her to understand her situation so well. Desdemona never recognizes her error and, using the other possible meaning of her name, she says "It is my wretched fortune."<sup>49</sup> Shakespeare, in the fullness of his meaning, says that her "wretched fortune" is a result of her "superstition." And, unlike Miranda, she has no Prospero to guide her imagination and set her in the right course. Her untutored understanding spawns monsters. Shakespeare in this bleak play shows us no way around Desdemona's problem. She leads a noble life but one that is against law and also against reason.

## VII

Finally, let us consider the last member of the play's trinity, Iago. Iago is clearly the devil. He says so himself and is often so called.<sup>50</sup> But in the case where god is not perfect the devil's negativity may be a source of liberation, an aid to the discovery of the truth. Iago has always been condemned and hated, and certainly what he does is most terrible; but a defense can and must

<sup>48</sup> V, ii, 147-156. Othello has smothered Desdemona at line 105 and is persuaded she is dead by line 116. Whether Shakespeare meant that she return to life, or Othello was mistaken and she was not yet quite dead, Desdemona's words, coherent sentences uttered after strangulation, constitute a remarkable occurrence, outside the natural order of things. This difficulty has often been noted. I suggest that this last supreme effort of the poor creature was intended to give a supernatural impression to the audience, and that attempts to rationalize it, by changing the manner of her death or otherwise, miss the meaning. Precisely because of the improbability of what she does, do we know of the intensity of Desdemona's devotion and faith; she gives it a significance beyond the human in a play distinguished by its merely human context, one in which the cosmic reverberations characterizing Shakespeare's other great tragedies are absent. In the theatre, especially that of Shakespeare, improbabilities are the devices for the expression of greater but unutterable probabilities.

<sup>49</sup> IV, ii, 150.

<sup>50</sup> I, i, 169, 121-122, iii, 427; II, ii, 310-312, 323-325, 381-382; III, iv, 50; V, ii, 351-352.

be made for him.<sup>51</sup> Shakespeare plays upon a human softness and sentimentality in this work. We so like to flatter our own goodness and warmheartedness that we are unwilling to recognize hard truths. Our natural partisanship with love and lovers causes us to see only Iago's wickedness in destroying the love of Othello and Desdemona; we like to believe that without his intervention all would have been well. But the very terribleness which so moves us teaches us, albeit unconsciously, that this is not just another love story, that there is here an inevitability we wish not to face, one we hide in our condemnation of Iago.

Iago, as I have said, is only a mirror or an agent that causes the unseen to become visible. Lived over and over again, the love of Desdemona and Othello would end the same way. Yet no matter how often it happened, each time we would be as shocked and surprised as we were the first time; for the result runs counter to our wish and our wishes cause us to bury the truth. Shakespeare is, in the final accounting, very hard. Iago's speeches, read dispassionately, show that he is the clearest thinker in the play. Honest Iago is not merely a tragically misplaced epithet. Iago does tell more of the truth than any other character. It is difficult to understand his motivation; no villain in Shakespeare seems to act without some plausible end in view, an end the value of which all men would recognize, although they might perhaps not be willing to commit the crimes necessary to arrive at it. But Iago, as does the devil, seems to act from pure negativity. I am not what I am.<sup>52</sup> Whatever Othello wants, Iago wants the opposite. He is sub- or super-human. But in opposing Othello he shows that the world dominated by Othello is a world of fancy. He speaks out for a freedom which none of the others recognize. Iago wishes to live his own life free from the domination of other men, and especially of other men's thoughts. He realizes that true tyranny is not imposed by force but imposes itself on the minds of men. For Iago, man can free himself only by thought. He has thought through the emptiness of most beliefs and will not live in subordination to them. He cannot found his life on self-deception, as Othello does.<sup>53</sup>

His analysis of things generally esteemed leads to several conclusions. He is in the first place a materialist. The solidity of money as a means for living freely is clear, so he does not share the noble man's contempt for it. (The noble man usually has money already, so is not forced to the salutary reflection on its necessity.) The word "purse" is found in his mouth very often. In the second place, he knows that reputation is often ill gained and worse lost. He not only knows it but demonstrates it in his manipulations of Othello and Cassio, and by his own very good repute. A man must be independent of reputation or he is the slave of public whim. He tells this beautifully to Cassio, and to show how opposite Othello's view is, Iago tells him that reputation is everything and the purse trash. For Iago reputation is trash and he who follows it lives for others. Since reputation is no real sign of true virtue, it follows that straightforward

<sup>51</sup> Macaulay made an able one, cited in the Furness *Variorum*, pp. 412-413.

<sup>52</sup> I, i, 71; cf. Exodus, iii, 14; cf. III, iii, 103.

<sup>53</sup> I, iii, 350-390.

honesty is undesirable. A man must appear to be what the public wants, and freedom to live well depends upon cultivating deception. Iago reveals the strange fact that freedom to pursue the truth requires deception, for the truth runs counter to much necessary prejudice; and he who wants to be open must either be a martyr or deceive himself for the sake of popularity. Moreover, Iago is the only character who has comic lines in an unusually humorless play. The serious things, so piously considered by the others, are subjects of his wit. Part of his freedom comes from being able to laugh at mankind, to see that much of its pretension is comic. Connected with this is his contempt for romantic love. He sees nothing in it beyond physical passion. Love cannot take on such grand significance for him, and the attempt to make it sacred is ridiculous.<sup>54</sup>

All the bonds that link humanity and make living together possible have been dissolved in Iago. Trust is impossible for him because to trust implies respect for other human beings, a respect in which he is completely deficient.<sup>55</sup> When a man believes that public opinion, or his own sense of shame, are merely devices of the herd to make men live for others rather than themselves, all the monsters of passion are released within him. Iago is jealous, lecherous, and ambitious; his reason and reasonableness allow him to divest himself of all the clogs of convention but give him no stable goals for action. Only his emancipated passions supply him with objects of desire. Iago himself has no idea of what he wants. He is eminently a private man; he can care for no one but himself and his views justify this selfishness, for there is no reason to serve a morality created in the interest of others.<sup>56</sup> He is an example of what is often asserted will happen when men no longer believe in God; he is an atheist.

Now, if such a private view of life and man is grafted on to the thought of a political man, a man who is interested in public life, the result is the development of a severe and punishing morality. A political man knows of the necessity of civil society, that the common good can only be served if there is a habit of obedience to law and a deference to custom. If he is convinced that men are by nature bad, then he must believe in the use of force, deceit and terror to make them conform. Iago succeeds in convincing Othello of his own view of mankind yet this does not alter Othello's way of life; he does not renounce public life and vow to pursue his own passions, as would seem reasonable for a man with such an opinion. He decides instead to force men to be what he formerly thought they naturally were. Othello was peculiarly susceptible to this

<sup>54</sup> II, i, 119-191. In this scene all of Iago's little rhymes reflect Desdemona's situation in one way or another, especially the central one.

<sup>55</sup> Othello, on the contrary, believed that men are fundamentally what they seem to be (III, iii, 139-151; cf. I, iii, 422-425). Iago has made the distinction between seeming and being, and everything he does is based on it. One must live for the real which is radically different from the apparent while seeming to be what one is not. He can use Othello because Othello cares so much about appearance; and because, once he too has begun to distrust appearance, he believes in the possible reality of anything. Iago's, "I never found a man who knew how to love himself" (I, iii, 344-345), is the expression of the moral attitude that is the result of his views.

<sup>56</sup> I, i, 45-70.

persuasion, for he was not a member of a city where men through long habit have learned to live together, and where they do not indulge themselves in questioning whether it is good or not that they do so. Even if they raised the question, the force of habit would be likely to keep them in their civil ways. Othello, on the other hand, cannot rest content with obedience grounded on unconscious repetition; he is universal and a stranger and requires that man deliberately choose the good. And it is perhaps true that the majority of men, outside of the particular training which has broken them to their city's laws, would not be so just, and would be more likely to consult their private interests. Othello is gentle and loving as long as he believes in man's goodness; he becomes a tyrant when he doubts. To fit the cosmopolis of which he dreams men must be transformed, and what was once innocuous in them now becomes a great danger. Iago wants and needs the change he produces in Othello. He does not believe in the common good. But when he can control Othello and use Othello's fears to punish others, he will be in a perfect position to do as he lists. His apparently unmotivated vengeance expresses his freedom. A morality based on ritual and suspicion fits the needs of this hypocrite, informer, and false accuser. Tartuffes can always stand for morality. The devil can quote scripture, especially when he has written it. Iago makes use of Othello's good but misguided intentions, and Othello's tragedy comes when he realizes that his life has been used to destroy others for the sake of an Iago. Iago is Othello's ensign, or standard bearer, in something more than name.

Iago is also a stranger in Venice, but he does not need to practice self-deception, since he does not care for honor. For him his profession is simply a job. He has no need to try to add dignity to it, hence he is not compelled to try to make Venice's beliefs his own. Of course the result of this is that he cannot participate in the heroic character of an Othello. However revealing his existence may be, and the truth is not an unimportant thing, his is not a life that men would wish to imitate. His critique of ordinary beliefs leaves him in the end with no real purpose in life at all. He opposes established custom in the name of freedom, but this freedom is compatible with the basest and most arbitrary ends. He can trust no one and is full of fear that he himself will be deceived because men are base. His negativity leads only to the breakdown of order and turns his life into a chaos.

*Othello* appears then to leave us with this choice: a mean life based on a clear perception of reality, or a noble life based on falsehood and ending in tragedy. Othello is open and loving but deceived. Iago knows well the defects of Othello's life, but certainly offers no alternative worthy of choice. Yet Iago, in the end, is himself destroyed, but not by the baseness he understands and fears. Iago, otherwise so clear-sighted, fails to see one thing. He cannot foresee that Emilia would be willing to die for the truth. The possibility of a simple unadorned passion for nothing but truth is not within his ken. But would not a life expressing such a passion be both noble and, by its very nature, free from deception?